

One Among Many
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Luke 15:1-7

Now all the tax-collectors and sinners were coming near to listen to him. And the Pharisees and the scribes were grumbling and saying, 'This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them.'

So he told them this parable: 'Which one of you, having a hundred sheep and losing one of them, does not leave the ninety-nine in the wilderness and go after the one that is lost until he finds it? When he has found it, he lays it on his shoulders and rejoices. And when he comes home, he calls together his friends and neighbors, saying to them, "Rejoice with me, for I have found my sheep that was lost." Just so, I tell you, there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous people who need no repentance.'

Written in about the year 1722 by a Slave Trader and businessman named John Newton, the hymn Amazing Grace has come to be a favorite for many Christians. It was quite popular on both sides of the pond during the revolutionary war, it was used as a substitute funeral service for the Cherokee Indians during the trail of tears, it has become a favorite of people involved with peace and justice work, it is often used in alcohol and drug recovery groups, and is commonly used at funerals and memorial services to honor and remember the deceased. The hymn opens with this popular and comforting words, "Amazing Grace, how sweet the sound, that saved a wretch like me. I once was lost, but now am found, was blind, but now I see." I once was lost, but now am found – such a simple and timelessly profound statement.

The 15th chapter of Luke contains three parables that all deal with the same theme of the lost being found. A couple of weeks ago now Steve preached about the popular story of the prodigal son. This week we turn to the story of the Lost Sheep, a story that is paired with and quite similar to the parable of the woman and the lost coin. They both

tell about seeking and being sought. They are both about being found in the midst of the stuff life throws our way.

Before we jump into the meat of this parable though, let's pause and take just a minute to remember the context in which Jesus was telling all three of these parables. The first two verses of Luke 15 provide for us the setting; they tell us what is going on. *Now all the tax-collectors and sinners were coming near to listen to him. And the Pharisees and the scribes were grumbling and saying, 'This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them.'* The religious people of the day are upset with Jesus because he is reaching out to and interacting with people that they feel he shouldn't. They disapprove of his actions and so – they grumble.

In response to their grumbling Jesus tells the parable of the Lost Sheep.

'Which one of you, having a hundred sheep and losing one of them, does not leave the ninety-nine in the wilderness and go after the one that is lost until he finds it? When he has found it, he lays it on his shoulders and rejoices. And when he comes home, he calls together his friends and neighbors, saying to them, "Rejoice with me, for I have found my sheep that was lost." Just so, I tell you, there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous people who need no repentance. (Luke 15:3-7).

While this parable is about the lost being found it is also about more than that – it is about a new way of relating to one another as human beings in the world. Taking a minute to understand the role of the Shepherd in Jesus' time helps make this clear. The Luke commentary in the New Interpreter's Bible provides the following explanation. The role of shepherds in the community and the view of shepherds in the scriptures

changes over time. In the Hebrew Scriptures, particularly in Isaiah and the Psalms, “God is described as Israel’s shepherd.” In both the Hebrew Scriptures and in early Christian literature “the shepherd served as an image of the religious leaders of the people....” Images of the Shepherd carrying or leading sheep appear as a representation of Christ in catacomb art by the third century.

However the New Interpreter’s Bible also explains that, “In contrast to the positive image of the shepherd in both the Hebrew Scriptures and the early Christian writings, shepherds had acquired a bad reputation by the first century as shiftless, thieving, trespassing hirelings. Shepherding was listed among the despised trades by the rabbis.” Telling the parable of the Lost Sheep, Jesus was turning the criticism of the Scribes and the Pharisees back on them. Pharisees would have looked down upon shepherds, but Jesus responds to the criticism of his acceptance of tax collectors and “sinners” by telling a story that casts God in the role of the shepherd. The point seems to be this – Jesus’ actions in accepting sinners and eating with them reflects God’s gracious spirit toward those who were held in contempt by the Pharisees and scribes. God’s love and grace are offered to all and reach out to all, even those persons that the good religious folks might tend to judge and condemn.

The imagery of Lost and Found then is not simply about being saved or being damned, it is not simply about being freed to heaven or condemned to hell. Many strains of Christianity try to oversimplify things in such a way, but life and faith are much more complex than this. The metaphorical use of lost and found in this text creates room for multiple levels of meaning. As people who strive to follow God on a day to day basis some people might claim that they are found. This understanding of Christianity is

overly simplistic though. Journeying through life and growing in our faith is a journey – a process.

To say that one is a Christian, does not necessarily say that all of their problems are solved or that they will never have to doubt or question anything in life. A person can call themselves a Christian, can say that they are committed to God, and still struggle and wrestle with God. Folks, this is the best way be committed to God; to wrestle, to doubt, to question, to create opportunities for growth. Blind acceptance does not create a healthy relationship. The best relationships are dynamic interactions that allow room for growth. We will wander, we will stray, we will be lost, God will call out to us and seek us out and we will be found, until we wander again and the whole process starts again. In our journey through life as Christians there will be days when we are both lost and found, maybe even multiple times.

I was talking with a youth during Middle School Mission Week this week about their faith journey. This youth was explaining to me that they want desperately to be close to God, to do the things that they're supposed to do, but that they just fall short time and time again. Daily this youth seemed to be wrestling with the tension of being lost and found – within themselves and within their relationship with God. I tried to assure them that this was a natural part of developing faith and would be something that would continue their whole life through. We are never found entirely, completely, and finally, we are found and lost again and found in a cycle that will repeat itself through all of our days.

At its best then the church is to provide a place where people can connect with God and be found. Once found we, of course have the tendency to wander again, to be

lost, but we also have the opportunity, as people who have been found, to help others in our community of faith and our broader community. As those who have been found we have a task before us then that becomes two fold. We are to reach out to those who are lost, who are disconnected from God, and to help them be found. At the same time then we are also called to help keep those who have been found (ourselves included) from straying and wandering.

Let's look first at our call to help those who have been lost be found, to reconnect with God. We are called to reach out into our communities and to share the good news of God's reconciling love with our neighbors and with everyone we meet. This is something that we as Ridge Church do well. We are great about opening our doors to the community and creating a welcoming and inviting space. We host meals and programs for the community that draw great numbers of people. Our Fish Frys and Chicken Dinners are great ways to do this. Vacation Bible School, The Rummage Sale, the Women's Luncheon, Open Gym, Winning at Life, the 3rd of July celebration are all great ways to connect with the community and to help those people who are wandering or who are lost be found. It is our hope as we offer all of these programs that people will be able to connect with the love of God through the love they experience from us. By inviting people to all of these activities that we hold as well as to worship on Sunday mornings, we are able to model the love of the Good Shepherd seeking out the one, the lost, the wandering.

At the same time as we are reaching out to those who are lost and wandering, we also need to make sure that we're working to keep those who have been found (again, ourselves included) from wandering. We need to take time to study and grow in our

relationship with God, to help ourselves stay close to the call of the shepherd and to model to others the importance of staying close to the shepherd. We need to seek to connect ourselves with others in the flock and we need to all assist the shepherd by keeping others from the flock close to us and caring for them in their times of need, when it would be easy to wander from the community and from God. Over the last several weeks now it has been a real blessing to watch this congregation surround the Lukoshus family and to shepherd them with love. In the midst of a situation like they've been facing it would be easy to wander, to feel lost and disconnected from the flock, but the care that you have extended has been remarkable to see.

Both of these things, our need to reach out to and to help people connect to the flock, as well as our need to help keep people from wandering in the first place are related to our need as Christians to shepherd one another. In many ways we are like the 99 who are left behind in the parable Jesus tells. Imagine what it would have been like to be one of the 99 who were left behind when the shepherd went to search for the one. It could be scary and isolating and chaotic couldn't it?! But at the same time it could provide opportunities for growth and care of one another.

Healthy congregations, like I believe Ridge is, are a lot like the 99 who must take care of themselves and of each other. Many churches see their pastor as something of a chaplain, simply there to take care of the needs of the people. But, if the people reach out to care for one another, it frees the pastor, or pastors in our case, to be moving forward, dreaming, scheming, and empowering you in your ministries of care for one another.

I loved it last week at 11:00 o'clock when I was running late from 9:45 trying to get my robe on in my office I heard the liturgist take charge, change the game plan and

skip ahead in the service, and adapt because I was not yet there. It was a great example of shepherding that you all have the opportunity to do as you care for one another.

Additionally, there are many ways in which you can care for one another. Be intentional about connecting with people who are new as we greet one another during worship. Be intentional about following up with the prayer concerns that people raise from week to week. When someone is in the hospital or at home sick you can call and check on them or swing by and visit them. You all have the opportunity to shepherd and care for one another just as the 99 in the parable do.

It is by and through God's amazing grace that we are found. God reaches out to us and calls us back to Godself each and every time that we wander. May we all, hear God's call to return when we have strayed. May we all work together to shepherd each other and to reach out until that time when all of creation might sing together, Amazing Grace, how sweet the sound, that saved a soul like me. I once was lost, but now am found.